

The Tulsa Massacre

By Ann B Scott

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My cousin's children who live in Oklahoma were never taught about the Tulsa Race Massacre.

Tulsa was a growing, prosperous city with a population of more than 100,000 people; it was also a highly segregated city. Most of the city's 10,000 Black residents lived in Greenwood, which had a thriving business district known as Black Wall Street.

On May 30, 1921, a young Black teenager named Dick Rowland entered an elevator, and soon after the young, white, elevator operator, Sarah Page, screamed. A front-page story in the *Tulsa Tribune* that afternoon reported that police had arrested Rowland for sexually assaulting Page.

Later, an angry white mob gathered outside the courthouse, demanding the Sheriff McCullough hand over Rowland. He refused, and his men barricaded the top floor to protect the Black teenager. Later, a group of about 25 armed Black men went to the courthouse to offer help guarding Rowland, but the sheriff turned them away.

With rumors still flying of a possible lynching, a group of 75 armed Black men returned to the courthouse shortly after 10 pm, where they were met by 1,500 white men, some of whom were armed. After shots were fired and chaos broke out, the outnumbered group of Black men retreated to Greenwood.

Over the next several hours, groups of white Tulsans—some of whom were deputized and given weapons by city officials—committed numerous acts of violence against Black people, including shooting an unarmed man in a movie theater. On June 1, thousands of white citizens poured into the Greenwood District, looting, and burning homes and businesses. Firefighters who arrived to help put out fires later testified that rioters had threatened them with guns and forced them to leave; 1,256 houses were burned, and 215 others were looted but not torched. Two newspapers, a school, a library, a hospital, churches, hotels, stores, and many other Black-owned businesses were among the buildings destroyed or damaged by fire.

When the National Guard arrived, and Governor J. B. A. Robertson declared martial law, the riot effectively ended. Though guardsmen helped put out fires, they also imprisoned many Black Tulsans, and by June 2 some 6,000 people were under armed guard at the local fairgrounds.

In the hours after the Tulsa Race Massacre, all charges against Dick Rowland were dropped. The police concluded that Rowland had most likely stumbled into Page or stepped on her foot. Kept safely under guard in the jail during the riot, he left Tulsa the next morning and reportedly never returned.

A 2001 state commission examination of events was able to confirm 36 dead, 26 Black and 10 white. However, historians estimate the death toll may have been as high as 300. Even by low estimates, the Tulsa Race Massacre stood as one of the deadliest riots in U.S. history, behind only the [New York Draft Riots](#) of 1863, which killed at least 119 people.